**Daily Devotions**

**March 2023**

*03-01*

“‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.’ He answered them, ‘And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?’”

— Matthew 15:2-3

Touché, Jesus! As I’ve often said, Jesus turns everything on its head. We hear him say time and again things like, “You have heard it said…but I say…” He constantly called out the hypocrisy of the status quo and re-directed people back to God’s laws concerned with the welfare of God’s beloved children. He crossed all sorts of boundaries, offending the sensibilities of the powers that be in order to proclaim a gospel of radical welcome. Here he draws a clear line between tradition, the things people establish, and law, which God established. He is saying that God’s law, which is inclusive love for all people no matter what, supersedes the need to follow rituals that serve no function other than to set people apart from one another.

What can we learn from this interaction? Where in our own lives do we judge people for doing or thinking things a little—or a lot—different than we do, rather than seeing them for who they are: beloved children of God? Food for thought, this Wednesday morning.

Do I judge others who don’t follow the traditions I do?

*03-02*

“It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”

— Matthew 15:11

Sometimes I am quite shocked at the things that come out of people’s mouths. Mind you, I often joke that I lack filters—I say what I think without compunction, though I am generally careful to choose an appropriate audience. But when I watch the political situation in the United States, I cannot help but be utterly flabbergasted by the intense ugliness that comes out in discourse, whether on social media or in the halls of Congress. Sometimes it seems to me that there is a total disconnect between what people claim they believe in and what their words and behaviors reveal they actually believe. The results are little short of chaos.

But I don’t have to watch C-Span or scroll through Twitter to experience these disconnects. Sometimes I see them in myself. I judge others for being judgmental (um…hello?). I self-righteously blurt an opinion that hurts someone else and I later find to have been completely wrong. Most if not all of us find ourselves speaking before we think at one time or another. God forgives us, of course, but I think God would also want us carefully considering how to just take that pause so that what comes out of our mouth is pleasing to God, rather than just the perfect sound bite or comeback.

How do I make sure that what I say is loving and kind?

*03-03*

“Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.”

— Matthew 15:28

This problematic story is also one of my favorites. First of all, you should know that I reject any attempts to let Jesus off the hook for his behavior, as some interpreters do by trying to write it off as teaching his disciples a lesson. There is nothing in the text or the context to support this. So, that being said, what I like about this story is that (a) Jesus behaves in a 100% human way, and (b) this unnamed woman calls him on his bs and actually changes his mind.

We cannot forget for a moment that even though Jesus was fully God, he was also fully human. No one truly understands what this means or how it works—it’s just one of the things we accept on faith. But it does mean that as a human being, Jesus did, said, thought, felt, experienced absolutely everything it means to be human, which means sometimes you put your foot in your mouth. Sometimes you get it wrong. Without thinking, in spite of your genuine commitment to radical welcome and the unlimited love of God, you fall back on your sociocultural upbringing and tell a woman in another country that your message is only for the Israelites. It’s possible—even likely—that Jesus was just exhausted and did not want to be bothered. His disciples were whining. He’d been travelling. His lifestyle was not easy. And here’s one more person who wants something from him. I don’t know about you, but I’ve done and said some unpleasant things when I’m in a state like that, no matter how much my deeply held moral values and beliefs should have prevented it.

And then this woman—desperate for the sake of her daughter (and as a mom, I totally get this)—somehow has exactly the right words to argue Jesus to the mat in one sentence. Even after he insults her by calling her a dog, she does not get angry and go away. She turns the tables on him and calls out his own commitment to the idea that God’s love actually isn’t limited by geography or ethnicity. Talk about fortitude in the face of stress!

Jesus admits he got it wrong. He changes his mind. He acknowledges the woman’s superior logic and astonishing faith, and then immediately does for her what she wants. I get that this isn’t a comfortable story for a lot of people, but as for me, I find it a beautiful reminder that Jesus gets what it means to be human, which means he gets it completely when I am.

How do I feel about this story?

*03-04*

“The disciples said to him, ‘Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?’”

— Matthew 15:33

Are you nuts, Jesus? his disciples seem to say. If I’m honest, I say that kind of thing to God all the time. I live an incredibly privileged life—let me be clear about that—but it’s also quite challenging. And frankly, I worry about how I’m going to support myself and my two adult special needs children financially, emotionally, and physically. I find myself in that crowd who has been following Jesus—exhausted, hungry, lacking—and I know that Jesus has compassion for me. He wants me to be filled, to have everything it is that I need. And I look at him and I say, “Where am I going to get enough fill-in-the-blank to meet this new need?”

Then Jesus does this thing. You know, that thing that he does when he makes the seemingly impossible happen? He asks me, “What have you got?” and I give him a list of my available resources and he says, “It’ll be enough.” And somehow—and I kid you not, this happens over and over and over again—it is enough. Sometimes it requires me to ask for help (and, surprise! I get it). Sometimes it requires me to take some other indicated action. But mostly it requires trust, which I somehow manage to muster…most of the time. And then I get out of the way and let God work and then thank God over and over for whatever comes of it.

When has God shown up for me in a seemingly miraculous way?

*03-05*

“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

— Matthew 20:15

Main Idea: All people are valuable to God.

This story is hard to hear. Many of us reading this consider ourselves the early laborers, working hard and deserving compensation for our commitment and loyalty. So to hear that people who worked less got the same as those of us who work more doesn’t seem fair.

Let’s look at fairness as it comes to wages. Some of the hardest jobs to do get paid the least: cooks, cashiers, amusement attendants, childcare workers, housekeepers, home healthcare aids, and recreational protective services (lifeguards). None of these jobs allows for consistent breaks, and these workers are on their feet all day.

Some of the highest paying jobs include several in the medical field, computer/IT, architects, marketing and advertising, financial managers, and executives. Certainly these jobs can be hard work. But do these people work harder? Do they deserve more pay for their 40 hours than others? It seems we don’t pay for working hard as much as we pay for perceived value of that work. One way we might change this inequity is to change our perception of what’s valuable to us. If we valued people over what those people can do for us, there might be more equity in pay.

Jesus valued people over what the people could produce. The people who were hired in late in the day were no less valuable than the workers fortunate enough to get hired early in the morning. All people deserve to be fed. God’s sees value in all humanity and God’s generosity is grander than we can imagine.

*03-06*

“I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.”

— Psalm 16:7

I used to have incredible dreams. Of course, I found out that part of the reason was that I have a nocturnal limb movement disorder that was waking me up an average of 3 ½ times an hour (not 100%, but pretty much) so I was living with acute sleep deprivation for the first 30 years of my life. But the good part about all of that was the dreams. Vivid, active, filled with symbolism and meaning. I have felt the direct guidance of God in my dreams more times than I can count, and have acted on that guidance to good effect many times. So when I read that “in the night also my heart instructs me” it makes me think of all the times I woke up in the morning with clear memories of how my heart was instructing me on how to handle a difficult situation or move forward on some plan or other or, in some cases, to make major life changes that would transform things in a major way for the better.

Sometimes I miss those dreams. But God continues to give me counsel—sometimes shockingly directly—in myriad ways, not least of which through my daily reading and writing practice for my recovery programs and the feedback from sponsors and fellows and people in my life who know me intimately. Sometimes the things that come out of my pen surprise me (I often say that the Holy Spirit lives most actively in the space between my brain and the tip of my pen—weird things happen in that gap, I tell you!) I guess all I’m saying is that God does give us counsel one way or another, and that’s cool.

How does God speak to me? How do I know it’s God?

*03-07*

“Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

— Matthew 6:12

This text totally cracks me up. It feels a little like a Monty Python sketch. Jesus is irritable with the Pharisees and Sadducees and his obtuse disciples think he’s talking about bread. Then he just out and says it, “You idiots! How do you fail to see what I am so obviously saying?!?” And then the disciples are like, “Ah. He’s not talking about yeast, but about the teaching.

I know there is probably some more deep theological take I could have on this, but at the moment, I am simply enjoying the complete humanness of Jesus and his followers, and recognizing how easy it is for Jesus’ words to be misinterpreted even to this day. You can’t say the bible doesn’t have its comic moments, and I, for one, feel drawn in by them. They say to me, “You are welcome here. Everyone is. It’s okay to laugh at scripture and at yourself. God has an amazing sense of humor and God invites you to encounter scripture as you are.” That’s good news, indeed.

Do moments like this in scripture help you relate to the person of Jesus? Why or why not?

*03-08*

“But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’”

— Matthew 16:23

Ouch. That’s pretty harsh. As I wrote yesterday, I got the sense that Jesus was already irritated with his disciples, as they utterly failed to understand an obvious allegory and he had to spell it out for them. Now in the verses immediately following, Peter professes his belief that Jesus is the Messiah, then Jesus tries to tell his friends that he is going to die horribly. This time he is not speaking in allegories, but plainly, and I can only imagine how much this upcoming trial weighed on Jesus’ mind and heart. Perhaps that’s why he was so irritated with his friends when they failed to understand his warning about the “yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

So imagine you’re pretty raw because you know something terrible is coming your way and there’s no avoiding it. And imagine your best friend has just shown uncommon understanding of the fact that you are the Messiah. So you try to level with your followers—give them the unpleasant but inevitable truths of the near future, maybe hoping for sympathy and support, but certainly expecting basic understanding.

And Peter blows it. He says, “God forbid!” and tries to argue Jesus out of it, showing that while he might be right that Jesus is the Messiah, he has no clue about what the Messiah actually is.

And Jesus loses it. “You are the Adversary! (Satan) You’re getting in my way! That’s not what I need from you!”

As with yesterday’s comedy moment, today’s altercation simply draws me to Jesus’ humanness and helps me relate to him on a visceral level. I want to give him a hug, tell him I will support him no matter what it is he chooses to do, or has to go through. Of course, I have the gift of retrospect—I know what happens in the end. In the moment, I probably would have been no different than Peter.

Where do I find myself in this story? How does Jesus’ reaction to Peter make me feel?

*03-09*

“As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.” And they were greatly distressed.”

— Matthew 17:22-23

This short paragraph is sandwiched among several seemingly unrelated stories. Peter, James, and John have just come down the mountain from the Transfiguration to find that Jesus’ disciples don’t have the power to heal a sick boy. He scolds them for their lack of faith, then tells them even the tiniest bit of faith would allow them to move mountains.

Then they travel to Galilee, where Jesus says, “Oh, by the way, I’m going to die horribly in Jerusalem,” and his friends are greatly distressed.

Then they’re off to Capernaum where someone calls them out on not paying the temple tax, to which Jesus basically says, “God’s children don’t need to pay taxes to the temple of God, but, oh, just so we don’t make people made, go fishing and the first fish you catch will have a coin in its mouth to pay the tax.”

What can we glean from this in a simple devotion today? All three little vignettes point to one commonality: Jesus’ reign is not what you think. First, you don’t need immeasurable power to be an instrument of God’s healing—all you need is a tiny modicum of faith, and God will do the rest. Second, Jesus’ reign isn’t about him becoming a powerful, earthly king who will throw off the oppression of the Romans—it’s about him suffering and dying to destroy the oppression of sin and death. Third, in Jesus’ reign, access to God isn’t limited to those who can afford it—God’s love is freely given to all God’s children without exception.

In short, Jesus’ reign is in the world, but not of the world. And as Jesus’ followers, we, too, are invited to look critically at the societal norms in which we’ve been raised and see the ways Jesus shows up that are counterintuitive. That’s where freedom lies.

How do I see Jesus showing up in counter-cultural ways in my life and the world?

*03-10*

“What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?”

— Matthew 18:12

Um, no. He doesn’t. Unless the shepherd is God. In fact, any shepherd will tell you there’s no way they’ll leave their entire flock to the whims of the open field and the hazards of wolves and other predators to go find the one who is missing. If they’re lucky, they’ll have a companion who can go find the stray while they stay with the main flock.

Not so with God. Which is not to say that God capriciously leaves most people up to the whims of nature and fate and is only busy with the strays. God can, of course, be in all places at all times, so no one is left alone. But the point is that every single member of the flock is so incredibly precious to God that they have God’s absolute, full attention, and God will do anything to pursue, locate, and reclaim the missing sheep. It doesn’t matter you’ve done. It doesn’t matter who you’ve hurt. It doesn’t matter that every single time you go out into the fields you take off running and disappear all over again. God wants nothing more than to care for your every need and love you even if you can’t love yourself.

It doesn’t make practical sense. But God’s love doesn’t have to. That’s what makes it so transformational.

When have I strayed from God and felt that God sought me in love?

*03-11*

“‘Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, ‘Then who can be saved?’ But Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.’”

— Matthew 19:24-26

It’s easy for me to be smug and think this doesn’t apply to me. I’m not rich, I tell myself, choosing to define what “rich” means in a way that excludes me for my own self-justification.

Then I call myself on my bs. I make more than 60% of the world’s population. So if Jesus were to tell me to sell everything I own and live a simple life following him, could I? What about the medications I’m dependent on? What about the needs of my dependents? I live in Minnesota—not having heat really isn’t an option. When I moved into an apartment a couple years ago, I had a list of “non-negotiables” which I justified by saying: I’m fifty. I’m too old to scrape my car in the winter, or do my laundry down the hall or somewhere else, or live without air conditioning, or hand-wash all my dishes, and so on and so forth. These are incredible luxuries, and I know it. Could I walk away from them just because Jesus asks me to?

All I can say is that, while I do try to live a faith-filled life characterized by service, it is a great comfort to me to know that I do not have to earn salvation through my own merit. With God all things are possible. Thank God.

What would I be willing to give up to live a simpler life of faith?

*03-12*

“The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.”

— Matthew 22:8b-9

Main Idea: All are invited, but God expects those who show up to act appropriately.

This is clearly a story about insiders and outsiders. The original insiders—the king’s invited guests—quickly became outsiders when they ignored the king’s invitation, and even killed the king’s slaves. Probably not the best way to get invited back again. The king had them all killed and their cities burned.

But then the original outsiders—"everyone you find” (who are left after the king annihilated the rude ones)—quickly became insiders. Interestingly, the king didn’t distinguish here between the “good and bad”—all were invited.

Previously, people could only attend the wedding if they had been invited. Now, everyone was invited. Everyone. All by itself, this was a radical shift in tone for Jews who believed they were God’s chosen. They were the only insiders. They were the only ones invited to God’s kingdom. But now, Jesus was saying that everyone was invited. It kind of takes away from the specialness of being God’s when everyone is given the same ticket to ride.

But not everyone invited was allowed to attend. One friend showed up to the wedding unattired for the event. The consequence was dire—he was thrown “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

So, here’s an interesting takeaway. God’s generosity is abundant. God invites everyone—good and bad—to the wedding. But the wedding isn’t a free-for-all experience. Those invited (everyone) can’t just do whatever they want and reap the benefits of the banquet. The invitation is wide open. But those who choose to attend have some responsibility to regard the invitation with respect. They must come to the wedding adorned in wedding attire.

We might read it like this. We are all invited to participate fully in God’s kingdom. But we do have a responsibility to regard the invitation to participate with the honor and respect the invitation deserves. We can’t show up in the world in a way that is contrary to the intention of the inviter. We can’t show up to God’s kingdom of peace, justice, and equity, and also walk through the world with contempt, hatred, and jealousy. If we do, we come unadorned. God’s invitation raises the level of expectation that we show up ready to honor the kingdom God has invited us into.

*03-13*

“Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever. Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity.”

— Psalm 45:6

Yesterday I did some online research. It wasn’t related to anything Clergy Stuff, but any time I want to quote a biblical scholar I find online, I spend some time digging into their credentials. In this particular case, while the scholarly blog article was right on (the copious use of male pronouns for God notwithstanding) I went down the rabbit hole of the writer’s faith background and found myself on the web page for an accredited seminary that shall remain nameless. It took some digging but I finally reached a page outlining the school’s diversity statement and read with curiosity. And by the end of the page, I was rageful. I’m so sorry if you do not hold with my particular theology—know that Clergy Stuff, by definition, is by and for Christians who profess a far more liberal, even progressive theology, so hopefully you can forgive me for what I’m about to say.

Any claim that the only valid marriage is between a man and a woman and that every other expression of sexuality is against God is absolute horse puckeys. God’s royal scepter is a scepter of equity. Equity=justice; freedom from bias or favoritism. I’m not going to start throwing out biblical arguments to support my position. That’s hardly fruitful for someone who is just looking for a brief reflection on scripture to help them connect with God and prepare for their day. I’ll just leave you with this:

Think of the people in your lives who are powerful examples to you of deep, abiding love for one another, love that is clearly a reflection of God’s love for all God’s creatures. Are they all cisgender, heterosexual, married couples? For me, the answer is a resounding “no.” And God works through their examples to me every day to inform my understanding of the nature of God’s love and the sexual love between God’s human creations.

What informs my understanding of acceptable sexual relationships?

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“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.”

— Matthew 25:1-2

Main Idea: Life can be full when you are prepared to appreciate the little moments, rather than wishing away your life waiting on the big ones.

When we are kids, we spend a lot of time waiting for life to happen. We wait for Christmas. We wait for birthdays. We wait for milestones. We plan for our future, and it seems everything we do is in preparation for that future.

As young adults, we wait for that perfect someone. We wait for babies to arrive. We wait for that big promotion and spend time planning for our future.

Something happens in middle years—often called a midlife crisis—when we realize that we’re still waiting, and half our life is gone. We begin to see that the elusive big thing we’ve been planning for (writing that novel, becoming the company’s CEO, that epic trip overseas) may never come. The crisis comes when we ask ourselves, “Is this all there is?” We realize we’ve spent our whole lives living for our future and our past is just—poof—gone! Sometimes depression sets in or we go crazy trying to force some of the things we believed we were waiting for—the expensive car, the new partner.

Jesus’ story tells of ten brides waiting for a bridegroom. Five of them were prepared—they had enough oil to outlast the night. Five of them were unprepared—they had to go into town for more oil and when they returned, they had missed their opportunity.

The way I see it, Jesus’ words were a warning: be prepared. As long as we are only looking at an unspecified time way out in the future, we will always be waiting. But life has a way of offering us beautiful moments just when we least expect them. If we are not ready, we might just miss them.

I have spent much of my middle years reshaping my own attitude and expectations for life. Recently I took a plane trip with my teenage daughter. The flight arrived quite late on a Friday night (1:30am), and when we got to the rental car booth, they told us there were no cars left, despite our having reserved in advance. I was faced with a choice: freak out or figure it out. I stood there at the counter weighing my choices. I talked it over with my daughter. We could try to get a hotel near the airport and try again in the morning. We could sleep on the bench at the rental counter. Then the worker behind the counter, who had been watching us mull it over, told us to wait—even though it was after hours and the company had no more cars, he did have access to the cars in their budget lot. While we waited, he walked across the lot, retrieved a car, and said there was no way he was going to do the same for the two parties that had just arrived after us. And then he promptly fetched two more cars for those parties anyway.

If we had freaked out or rushed back to the airport to throw a fit, we would have missed the beautiful moment. We would have missed the kindness of a tired worker who just wanted to go home. It was my reminder to keep awake, to watch for those moments, and to notice and appreciate them when they happen. Life is too short to wait for the big moments and miss all the small ones. It’s the ones we weren’t planning for or expecting that make life full.

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“Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’”

— Matthew 25:45

Main Idea: Inaction is as bad or worse than acting reprehensibly.

Jesus described the coming of the Son of Man. On that day, he will separate the sheep from the goats. At his right hand will sit all who fed the hungry, clothed the naked, took care of the sick, and visited the imprisoned. At his left hand will sit all who did not feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and give the thirsty drink.

Interestingly, Jesus didn’t say that those excluded from the kingdom were the bad people—those who acted reprehensibly. He did not condemn those who betrayed loved ones, murdered innocents, or stole from the poor. The bar was far lower for those excluded. They were not the ones that acted improperly, but the ones that did not act at all.

We live in a culture that values privacy and autonomy. There is no harm in moving through the world with a minimal footprint. We do our thing, we keep to ourselves, and no one gets hurt.

But Jesus expects more. It is not enough to feed our own families or to climb the corporate ladder for ourselves. Jesus expects us to feed other people and help others succeed. We are to welcome those who show up at our doorstep hungry and without homes. We are to offer a helping hand to those whose skin color, culture, age, size, sexuality, or gender identity prevents them from achieving equitably. We are to humble ourselves so that others might be lifted up. Failing to harm is not enough. Failing to act is in some ways worse. It is more insidious in how inaction is perceived as benign. Inaction is not benign—its harm is invasive and ugly and painful. We can do better.

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